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## THE BIOLOGICAL VALUE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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Whether God, freedom, and immortality are realities or not, of one thing there is no question: it is a fact, for any observer to take note of, that in many minds there exists the belief in these objects. Religious beliefs are real as psychological entities regardless of the ontological status of the objects of the beliefs. It would be possible to construct a philosophy of religion wholly upon the fact and the value of religious belief, without raising the further question of the existence of the objects believed in, or even if we assumed the unreality of such objects. Beliefs may exist and have value for those who hold them as true even though they are entirely false, since the subjective effects of beliefs are independent of the question of truth; and it is even possible that religion is too good to be true.

Religion would continue in the world indefinitely upon the sheer basis of belief as a psychological fact—a biologically justified fact—even if the whole scientific and philosophical portion of mankind had agreed in branding all religious objects as unreal. James expresses the emotional necessity of religious beliefs for the majority of people when he says,<sup>1</sup> “Materialism and agnosticism, even were they true, could never gain universal and popular acceptance; for they both, alike, give a solution of things which is irrational to the practical third of our nature, and in which we can never feel volitionally at home.” Careful observers would have said, before Professor Leuba’s recent study<sup>2</sup> of the actual religious beliefs of American scientists showed that it is so, that the majority of scientists do not believe in God or immortality. This fact is not so significant for the future of religion, however, as the fact that the majority of the parents of each new generation do have religious beliefs. The parents and homes, the churches and general social background, of each new generation, exert a greater influence upon the religious beliefs of people than do a few scientists who have ceased to require religious belief

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<sup>1</sup> Wm. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Leuba, *The Belief in God and Immortality*.

in order to maintain their vital equilibrium. Making the whole world scientific is a hopeless task.

Beliefs exert a potent influence on life. The psychological and physiological effects of belief are shown strikingly in cases of primitive taboo where the *belief* that a taboo has been violated has, in numerous instances, caused death. World-views—beliefs about the ultimate things in man's total environment—are important influences on the physical economy of life. If two nations or races are equal in all respects except that the general philosophy and religion of the one is optimistic, and of the other, pessimistic, the race with the optimistic beliefs will survive in the struggle for existence, while the other race will be driven to the wall. As Goethe says:<sup>3</sup> "The real and sole theme of the history of the world is the conflict between belief and unbelief. All epochs in which faith reigns supreme, under whatever form it may be, are bright, uplifting, and fruitful for contemporaries and posterity. All epochs, on the other hand, in which unbelief, in any form, gains a weak victory, even though temporarily boasting a sham glory, will pass away."

Several writers have given clear expression to the biological setting of religious belief. Professor Leuba says:<sup>4</sup> "The mere belief in gods may of itself produce results sufficient to make of religion a factor of the highest biological importance." "The biological point of view affords the more fruitful outlook. From this point of vantage religion appears as a part of the struggle for life." "Morality and religion . . .," says Professor Carver,<sup>5</sup> "must be regarded as factors in the struggle for existence as truly as are weapons for offence and defence, teeth and claws, horns and hoofs, fur and feathers, plumage, beards, and antlers." "Who are the chosen people is not a historical question. It is a question of fact, adaptation, and survival. What is the true church will never be determined by archaeological and historical investigation. It will be determined by the laws of selection and survival." Of the actual religious beliefs of the past, Read says,<sup>6</sup> "Religion, in spite of its many drawbacks, has been so useful that families and tribes have been selected by their addiction to it."

The very fact of the existence of religious beliefs among all primitive peoples establishes a presumption in favor of the biological value of such beliefs. If at any time there have existed

<sup>3</sup> Notes to *Westöstlicher Divan*, as quoted in Paulsen's *System of Ethics* (Thilly's translation), p. 425.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Leuba, *A Psychological Study of Religion*, pp. 14, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> T. N. Carver, *Essays in Social Justice*, pp. 20, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Carveth Read, *Natural and Social Morals*, p. 226.

savage peoples without religious beliefs, they have not survived long in the struggle for life. All the peoples that have survived have possessed, among other things, religious beliefs. From this fact the evolutionist at once infers that religious beliefs must have been of some important service to the race. It might be argued against this by some objectors that the races which have survived have survived by virtue of other kinds of vital fitness, so that religious beliefs have counted neither for nor against survival. It is true that some organs exist the utility of which is not apparent. Since such variations have at least had no disutility, they have not been eliminated through the elimination of the organisms possessing them. But belief is of such practical importance that it can not by any possibility be regarded as neutral, that is, of no influence, favorable or unfavorable, in the struggle for existence. Consequently the universal existence of religious belief among primitive peoples is evidence of its survival value.

Some critics might admit that religious belief has been valuable in the past, during the infancy of the race, while they would argue that, like the vermiform appendix, it has outgrown its usefulness, or has even become a source of injury. G. E. Moore, for example, speaking of religious belief in modern society, says that "there is at least good room to doubt whether it ever does much good."<sup>7</sup> It can be shown, however, that religious belief still possesses value.

I would repeat that the question of truth is irrelevant to a discussion of the value of religious belief. I am studying the value of beliefs in their psychological context, without regard to the logical matter of truth. Actually, most of the early religious beliefs have had unreal objects, as all would agree, but their value is not thereby vitiated. Thus Read says,<sup>8</sup> "As for the falsity of a whole religion in its peculiar doctrines, that (I fear we must admit) does not necessarily render it debasing or pernicious; for we have here an extreme case of that astonishing phenomenon in human life, the utility of illusion." And Rashdall says in like manner, "Error and delusion may be valuable elements in evolution;—to a certain extent . . . they have actually been so."<sup>9</sup> Primitive religions have been the cause of many evils, it is true, but such evils have been more than counterbalanced by numerous positive values.

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<sup>7</sup> "The Value of Religion," *The International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. XII (1901-02), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. II, pp. 209-10.

I said above that religious belief cannot be regarded as a neutral factor in the struggle for existence. The enormous effect of strong belief is well illustrated by instances of violated taboos among primitive peoples. Frazer cites many striking examples.<sup>10</sup> A Maori slave, upon being told that the food which he had eaten had belonged to a chieftain, and was therefore taboo, "was seized by the most extraordinary convulsions and cramp in the stomach, which neevr ceased till he died about sundown the same day. . . . A Maori woman having eaten of some fruit, and being afterwards told that the fruit had been taken from a tabooed place, exclaimed that the spirit of the chief, whose sanctity had been thus profaned, would kill her. This was in the afternoon, and the next day by twelve o'clock she was dead." There is on record a case of a negro who ate a wild hen, which was taboo, upon the supposition that it was a domesticated fowl. Four years later he was told by his former host what he had eaten, whereupon he "immediately fell a-trembling, and suffered himself to be so far possessed with the effects of imagination, that he died in less than twenty-four hours." Many other instances of a similar sort are cited by Frazer. Such examples of the effects of belief in the case of violated taboos illustrate the general potency of belief. In the majority of cases, of course, taboos are not violated, on account of the beliefs about the consequences of violation, and so the race here receives its first moral instruction.

Though the hygienic value of optimistic religious beliefs in the case of the higher religions is important enough to make of religion a significant factor in the struggle for existence, religious beliefs have been of biological utility to a greater extent through their moral influence. In such forms of the higher religions as Catholicism, both the moral and hygienic values are important. There are certain standards of conduct that are justified by the forces of natural selection, and it seems to be a fact that religious beliefs are the only sufficient instrumentality permanently to maintain these standards. McDougall says<sup>11</sup> that the belief in immortality, which is one of the most central of religious beliefs, is essential to the survival of any nation because of its moralizing influence upon thought and conduct.

Some writers have attributed the beginnings and even the continued maintenance of all morality to religious belief.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd edit., Part II, *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*. See pp. 135, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Wm. McDougall, *Body and Mind*, Preface, pp. xiii, xiv.

Thus Pfeiderer says,<sup>12</sup> "The historical beginning of all morality is to be found in religion." And Caird says,<sup>13</sup> "Religion and morality are necessary correlates of each other." Such extreme views are untenable, for certainly in modern society religion is not an essential condition of morality *with all men*, and in primitive society many kinds of right conduct have an instinctive basis, especially in the family relationships. Nevertheless, religious belief has enhanced primitive morality, and continues, on the whole, to possess positive moral value.

Primitive morality is fundamentally a matter of the customs, or *mores*, of the group. Morality is always and everywhere a social phenomenon, arising from the interaction of individuals in groups. A group of Hobbesian individuals is biologically inconceivable. Man, like most of the animal kingdom, possesses various social instincts. Group selection<sup>14</sup> has tended to eliminate all of the too self-centered individuals. Since a group is stronger than an individual in the struggle for existence, only groups have survived; and furthermore, the existence of groups requires the presence of social instincts in the individuals that make up the groups. Altruism is just as instinctive as egoism, and is probably derived from the parental instinct. In many of the lower animals the social instincts manifest themselves in various forms of gregariousness and mutual helpfulness, and much more is this the case with man. Thus primitive man is fitted for moral life within groups by his aboriginal inheritance.

Acts are judged right or wrong by primitive man according as they conform or not to the group customs. So far as primitive customs are instinctive in origin, they have survival value, on the whole, since the instincts are one of the products of the struggle for existence. Religious beliefs enter, however, and complicate the situation. Many of the customs have a religious origin, and others are enforced by religious beliefs, especially by beliefs in taboo. Taboo is the original categorical imperative. It corresponds, in upholding early customs, to the "thou shall not" of the Mosaic code. Taboo is chiefly religious in origin, being based upon the belief in awful and mysterious penalties that will inevitably follow the infringement of certain rules. Since primitive morality consists of primitive customs, taboo is instrumental to primitive morality

<sup>12</sup> Otto Pfeiderer, *Philosophy of Religion* (Stewart and Menzies, translators), 4 Vols., Vol. IV., p. 230.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Religion*, 2 Vols., Vol. I., p. 237.

<sup>14</sup> See P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid, a Factor in Evolution*; Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Vol. II, Ch. XXXIV; Wm. James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 325.

through enforcing the *mores*. There are other means, such as public approval and disapproval and physical force, of enforcing primitive customs, but belief in taboos is one of the very strongest guardians of primitive group morality. Primitive customs have possessed some disvalue, through hindering progress, but they have had positive survival value on the whole; and taboo, in enforcing customs, has possessed value in the struggle for existence. Furthermore, the primitive *mores* have contained the germs of much of our present morality; and taboo has, therefore, been instrumental to the maintenance of conduct that is right, as judged by modern standards.

There have been other values of early religious belief. Religious belief has had what may be called industrial value so far as the industrial arts have developed in connection with the worship of the gods. Religious belief has had scientific and philosophic value so far as pure science and philosophy have developed from religion. The belief in spirits, hero-ancestors, gods, etc., by increasing the extent and complexity of primitive man's environment, has stimulated intellectual activity in dealing with the world. The worship of heavenly bodies has at least attracted serious attention to them, and consequently the science of astronomy owes something to early religious interests. Mythological accounts of the origin and nature of the world have stimulated curiosity about scientific questions, and have given place to more scientific cosmogonies and cosmologies. The various professions have had a religious origin. Priests and chieftains are often identical among primitive peoples. The medical profession has evolved from the work of medicine men. The first teachers were the priests and head-men, who gave instructions to the youth in the initiation ceremonies. There has been a close historical connection between theology and philosophy; and the early religious interest, first becoming intellectualized in the form of theology, has always tended to go over into general philosophy.

Among other values of early religious belief are artistic, social, and legal, or political, values. Primitive religious beliefs have had artistic value so far as poetry, music, sculpture, and architecture have developed out of the service of the gods. Dancing and music were originally of religious significance. The drama traces its origin to religious ceremonials. The first poetry consisted of stories of the gods. The first architecture worthy of the name arose in the construction of altars and temples. In the creation of images of the gods, sculpture appeared. Early painting represented the deeds of the gods and

of ancestral heroes who had been deified. Social value has attached to early religious beliefs so far as the beliefs have been a bond uniting groups in the worship of common deities, supplementing the instinctive basis of group unity. Legal and political values of early religious beliefs appear in the development of property rights and stable forms of government. Taboo has played an important part in the development of rights of property. Holy places are at first the property of the gods. In the case of taboo on chiefs, it is sometimes the case that everything that a chief touches becomes his property. It is of importance for social evolution that the conception of property rights should have arisen early. More obvious is the connection between religion and government or law. The legal profession was originally undifferentiated from the priesthood, and the first laws of the state were religious laws.

Not only the moral value of early religious beliefs, but also the other values, which I have called industrial, scientific, artistic, social, and legal, have been genuine values of a biological sort. They have all possessed evolutionary utility.

The most fundamental distinction between the lower, nature religions, and the higher, redemptive religions may be expressed in terms of the difference between desires for satisfactions of a temporal and physical sort, and desires for transcendent satisfactions. In the nature religions, man is satisfied if he has worldly prosperity; and he believes in and desires transcendent realities only as instruments to the attainment of his worldly desires. It was not until a considerable degree of civilization had been reached that the redemptive religions could appear and maintain themselves. Natural selection, perhaps, accounts for the suppression of interests of a redemptive sort in the periods of prehistoric savagery and of primitive culture, through eliminating any idealistic individuals that may have appeared. A Wordsworthian is not the kind of nature worshipper that would be fit to survive among primeval savages; but, in a social order of more refinement, idealistic beliefs possess a positive biological value for many individuals.

In the higher developments of the religious consciousness, the hygienic value of religious belief, which now becomes instrumental to optimism and hence to health and survival, is perhaps a more important value than the moral value, though the latter is still significant. The complete denial of the existence of the objects of religious beliefs would reduce a large portion of mankind logically to the acceptance of Mr. Russell's statement,<sup>15</sup> "Only on the firm foundation of unyielding des-

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<sup>15</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 61.

pair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." This would be the logic of the situation, but not the "biology" of it. Despair means death, literally. A race that despaired would perish from the earth; but a hopeful faith means life, and gives life abundantly. Faith is biologically necessary for the human race, and it is a psychological fact that "hope springs eternal in the human breast." Mr. Russell's statement is contradicted by the facts of biology and psychology, for on a foundation of despair no habitation at all for the soul can possibly be built.

Such a pessimism as Mr. Russell's is due as much to the pessimist's high ideals as to his beliefs about the objective nature of reality. Pessimism results from the belief in a fundamental misfit between reality and the objects of desire. The man who is content to be a brute, with a brute's desire, is not pessimistic if he finds the world fundamentally brutal. But to the man aware of the "noon-day brightness of human genius," pessimism comes if he believes that "the lofty thoughts that enoble his little day" are insufficiently grounded in the ultimate nature of things.

For large numbers of individuals in modern society, belief in the reality of another world of which the physical world is but a shadow and a promise, is essential to optimism and to a healthy state of mind in general. Professor Hocking's assertion<sup>16</sup> that optimism requires the denial of the reality of the world as it appears to be, together with belief in transcendent realities, is justified by the psychological facts so far as many persons (though not all) are concerned. The "*Weltschmerz* bred of reflection," or "religious pessimism," according to James, "consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply."<sup>17</sup> "Its great reflective source has at all times been a contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is."<sup>18</sup> "No brute can have this sort of melancholy; no man who is irreligious can become its prey. It is the sick shudder of the frustrated religious demand."<sup>19</sup>

The inevitable pessimism of naturalism for all persons of sensitive natures who are also reflective, and who take a wide view of reality, has been a frequent theme in prose and in poetry. Some lines in James Thomson's "*City of Dreadful Night*" express vividly the despair of religious pessimism:

<sup>16</sup> W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, p. 168.

<sup>17</sup> Wm. James, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

“ ‘The man speaks sooth, alas! the man speaks sooth;  
 We have no personal life beyond the grave;  
 There is no personal God; Fate knows nor wrath nor ruth:  
 Can I find here the comfort which I crave?’ ”

“ ‘Speak not of comfort where no comfort is,  
 Speak not at all: can words make foul things fair?  
 Our life’s a cheat, our death a black abyss:  
 Hush, and be mute, envisaging despair.’ ”

James points out two possible ways of relieving such pessimism. “The longing to read the facts religiously may cease, and leave the bare facts by themselves; or, supplementary facts may be discovered and believed in, which permit the religious reading to go on.”<sup>20</sup> The first alternative would mean the giving up of religion and the acceptance of a materialistic philosophy. It is true that such a solution is accepted by many persons, but James emphasizes correctly the biological impossibility of the general acceptance of materialistic views by all of mankind.<sup>21</sup> A spiritual view, on the other hand, releases hope and moral courage; and hope and moral courage are among the things men live by. Such religions as Christianity and Buddhism are essentially religions of deliverance from the vanity of worldly desires. Buddhism is pessimistic so far as the physical world is concerned, but its adherents are made optimistic, and so are enabled to survive in the physical world, through their beliefs in transcendent realities.

Browning’s optimism was based upon religious idealism. Reality, as he believed it to be, coincided with what he valued most. Abt Vogler’s keys gave their sounds to the wish of the musician’s soul. In music this “wish flowed visibly forth.” The man with an idealistic temperament will be an optimist only if he believes that this “palace of music,” the objectification of lofty aspiration, is “founded flat on the nether springs” of reality. The religious idealist experiences all the emotions of spiritual sovereignty, believing, with the creative musical genius of Browning’s poem, that “’tis we musicians know.” By him, reality is taken to be such as to satisfy all his deepest longings. For him—

“All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;  
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor  
 power  
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist  
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. IV.

Though man's emotional nature in so many cases requires idealistic and religious beliefs, it by no means follows that such beliefs are true. To maintain that the value of idealism implies its truth would be to commit the pragmatic fallacy.<sup>22</sup> But there is every reason to think that large numbers will continue to accept religious idealism as true, simply because in so many cases man's emotions determine his beliefs. Those who predict the "irreligion of the future" fail to take into account the emotional and temperamental basis of belief. We may correctly conceive of the conflict between religion and irreligion, idealism and materialism, as a biological struggle between the "tender-minded" and the "tough-minded,"—and the biological advantage lies to some extent with the "tender-minded" so far as their emotional cravings are satisfied by religious beliefs. Religious beliefs not only make for optimism, but are also instrumental in motivating moral endeavor; and consequently, in the highest as well as in the lowest forms of religion, religious beliefs have important biological values.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. the author's article, "Two Common Fallacies in the Logic of Religion," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, Vol. XIV., (1917), pp. 653-660.